2014-15
ANNUAL REPORT

Veterans Review and Appeal Board

Your right to be heard

Veterans Review and Appeal Board Canada

Tribunal des anciens combattants (révision et appel) Canada

Canada

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Veterans Review and Appeal Board Annual Report 2014-15

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Chair's Message

This Annual Report details the Veterans Review and Appeal Board's work in 2014-15 to deliver a national appeal program for Veterans' disability benefits decisions.

We provide an independent avenue of appeal and give Veterans their only opportunity to appear before decision-makers to tell their story. The Board's program is not only essential to fairness in the disability benefits adjudication system, it is important to the well-being of Veterans and their families. Board Members and staff keep this front of mind as we work together to deliver the appeal program and look for ways to serve Veterans and their families better.

In 2014-15, we continued to take important steps to improve the appeal process and the efficiency of our organization. This work was led by John Larlee, who completed his term as Chair of the Board in April 2015. As Deputy Chair at the time, I witnessed a great deal of positive change at the Board under Mr. Larlee's leadership.

Notably, we improved the hearing documentation which is the basis for hearings and decisions, published more decisions and decision-making resources on our website, and expanded our outreach with the Canadian Armed Forces, RCMP, and Veterans. We also continued to receive important feedback from Veterans about their hearing experience.

I am also happy to report that the Board received very positive results in the 2014 Public Service Employee Survey: we had an exceptional response rate and above-average levels of employee satisfaction. I can say that these results are not surprising. On a daily basis, I witness employees who are dedicated to serving Veterans and their families, and who carry out their work with the utmost professionalism. It is thanks to their hard work that we are able to deal with a complex and challenging workload, and realize achievements to ensure the success of our program.

Thomas Jarmyn, CD
Acting Chair
Veterans Review and Appeal Board

1. Who We Are and What We Do

Created in 1995, the Veterans Review and Appeal Board (VRAB, the Board) is the arm's-length tribunal that provides an independent avenue of appeal for disability benefits decisions made by Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC, the Department).

WHAT WE DO FOR ILL AND INJURED VETERANS

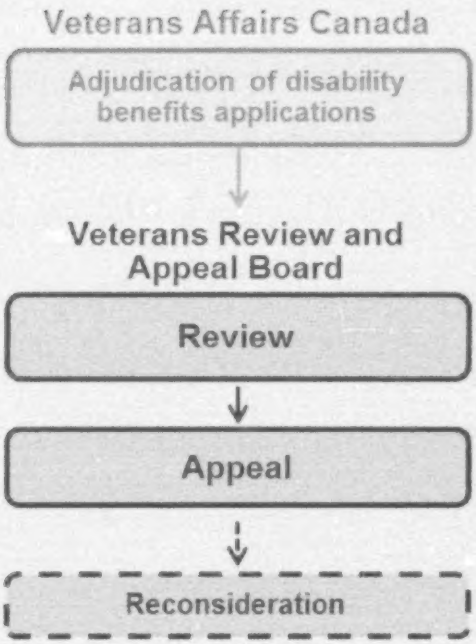
The Board ensures that Canada's Veterans receive the disability benefits to which they are entitled under the law. To do this, the Board offers two levels of redress for disability benefits decisions: a Review hearing; and, if the Veteran remains dissatisfied, a subsequent Appeal hearing. It also provides the final level of appeal for War Veterans Allowance decisions.

In 2014-15, the Board had an operating budget of $9.5 million to deliver a national appeal program with hearings across the country.

AN INDEPENDENT APPEAL PROCESS

The Board operates at arm's length from the Department to provide a fair and independent appeal process. This means that the Board is an entirely separate organization. As independent decision makers, Board Members are not bound by previous decisions and will change them to benefit Veterans based on credible evidence.

DISABILITY BENEFITS ADJUDICATION: HOW THE BOARD FITS IN



VISION, MISSION, VALUES

The Board's Vision, Mission, and Values express our commitment to serving Veterans and their families. These statements inform our work and guide all employees.

Vision

To be recognized as the independent, fair, and knowledgeable appeal tribunal that supports Veterans, Canadian Armed Forces and RCMP members, and their families in obtaining the benefits they are entitled to for service-related disabilities.

Mission

To provide timely, respectful hearings and fair, plain-language decisions to Veterans, Canadian Armed Forces and RCMP members, and their families who turn to the Board for redress of their disability benefits decisions.

Values

Independence: We ensure our decision-making is free from all outside influences.

Impartiality: We treat everyone in a fair and unbiased manner.

Respect: We treat everyone with courtesy and respect.

Excellence: We strive to attain the highest standards through continuous improvement and innovation.

Integrity: We are professional and ethical in all we do.

Accountability: We accept responsibility for our actions and decisions.

THE BOARD: AN ADMINISTRATIVE TRIBUNAL

Administrative tribunals like the Board are highly specialized in the kind of cases they hear. They give dissatisfied people an avenue of appeal that is less formal, less costly, and less time-consuming than the courts.

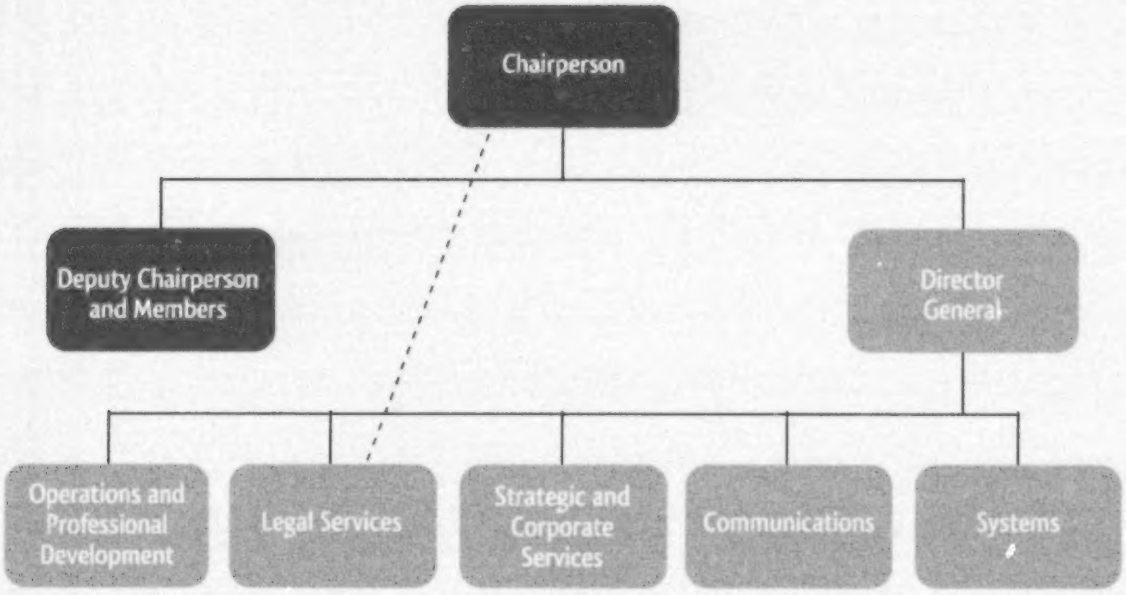
The Board's work is governed by the:

- *Veterans Review and Appeal Board Act;* and
- *Veterans Review and Appeal Board Regulations*.

It is important to note that section 3 of the *VRAB Act* requires the Board to liberally construe and interpret the legislation to fulfill the recognized obligation of the people and Government of Canada to those who have served their country so well, as well as their dependents.

Applications for Review and Appeal can be made to the Board under the:

- *Pension Act;*
- *Canadian Forces Members and Veterans Re-establishment and Compensation Act* - *Part 3* (New Veterans Charter);
- *War Veterans Allowance Act;*
- *Royal Canadian Mounted Police Pension Continuation Act;* and
- *Royal Canadian Mounted Police Superannuation Act*.



OUR ORGANIZATION

The Board is a micro-organization with a small, dedicated staff. The Chairperson, appointed by the Governor in Council, is the Board's Chief Executive Officer and reports to Parliament through the Minister of Veterans Affairs.

The Board has up to 25 full-time Members (including the Chair and Deputy Chair). They hear cases brought forward for redress at the Board, and decide whether the evidence meets the requirements of the legislation to award new or increased levels of disability benefits.

The Director General provides strategic leadership for the effective planning and management of Board operations and corporate management functions. The Board employs approximately 80 public servants to support the delivery of its program.

The most rewarding part of my job is...

"knowing that every day, the Board gives Veterans the opportunity to have an objective party listen to their stories, and often finds that they do in fact have a right to new or additional benefits. It is rewarding to know that as an administrative tribunal, we make a difference in thousands of Veterans' and their families' lives each year by giving them benefits that were otherwise denied."

Dale Sharkey, Director General

"the satisfaction that I feel when I finish working on a file, and I realize that I'm helping a person who has dedicated themselves to protecting and serving my family, friends, and other Canadian citizens."

Ryan Keefe, Legal Research Assistant / Paralegal

"knowing that what I do will benefit the Veteran. Reviewing and improving business processes are key to ensuring that we are providing a great service to Veterans who, in turn, have served our country and Canadians with the highest regard of service."

Karen Gallant, Project Manager

2. The Board's Program

At Board hearings, Veterans can bring forward new information, give oral testimony, and have arguments presented in support of their applications. Board members are there to listen and ask questions to help them make a fair and informed decision.

REVIEW HEARINGS

Review hearings are conducted by panels of two Board Members in locations across the country. Here, Veterans have the opportunity to give oral testimony, present evidence and arguments, and bring witnesses in support of their case.

This is their only opportunity in the disability benefits adjudication process to appear before decision-makers and tell their story in their own words. Veterans have access to free legal counsel through the Bureau of Pensions Advocates (BPA), and are reimbursed for their travel costs to attend their hearings.

The Board's process is non-adversarial, which means no one is arguing against the Veteran or defending the VAC decision under review.

Hearings are open to the public, except in special circumstances where the Veteran requests and is granted a closed hearing (subsection 36.2, *VRAB Act*). We encourage members of the public to attend hearings, as this contributes to a greater understanding of the Board's decision-making. Anyone interested in observing hearings should contact us so that we can confirm hearing locations and dates.

APPEAL HEARINGS

If a Veteran is dissatisfied with their Review decision, they can request an Appeal hearing which is the second and final level of redress.

Appeal hearings are conducted primarily in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island by panels of three Board Members who did not hear the same case at Review. While the legislation does not permit oral testimony at this level, the Appeal hearing provides a further opportunity for a Veteran, through their representative, to submit new information and make arguments in support of their case. Appeal decisions are final and binding.

WHAT IF A VETERAN IS DISSATISFIED WITH AN APPEAL DECISION?

Veterans who are dissatisfied with their final-and-binding Appeal decision can apply to the Board for a Reconsideration (i.e. a reopening of the case) if new, credible, and relevant evidence comes to light at a later date, or if an error in fact or law is found in the Appeal decision.

If a Veteran has exhausted all their redress options at the Board and is still dissatisfied, they have the right to apply to the Federal Court of Canada for a judicial review of the decision. In a judicial review, the Court's role is to decide whether the Board made a reasonable decision based on the evidence before it and whether it properly performed its function in making the decision, not to rule on the merits of the case (i.e. whether the Veteran should receive a favourable decision from the Board).

Written Decisions with Reasons

After a hearing, Board Members discuss the information and arguments of the case to make a decision. They conduct a thoughtful analysis of all available information (i.e. oral testimony, medical reports, opinion evidence from experts, written statements, etc.) and discuss the merits of the case, bearing in mind the requirement to resolve any doubt in the weighing of evidence in favour of the Veteran. At Review, if the two panel members disagree, the decision most favourable to the Veteran stands; at Appeal, the decision of the majority of the three panel members stands.

The Board is required by law to prepare written reasons to inform Veterans of how and why the decision has been made. These are prepared at the Board's office in Charlottetown and usually mailed within six weeks of the hearing. This time is needed to ensure decisions are well-reasoned and clearly written.

3. Caseload

In 2014-15, the Board continued to focus on providing Veterans with timely, respectful hearings and fair, plain language decisions.

INCOMING CASES

The best indicator of how many applications the Board is likely to receive in a given year is the annual volume of VAC's disability benefits decisions.

As the table below shows, the last five years have seen a decrease in the number of decisions at VAC, and consequently at the Board. During this time, our Review decisions have represented between 8.5% and 10.2% of VAC's decisions that have appeal rights to the Board.

Fiscal Year	VAC decisions*	VRAB Review decisions	As a % of VAC's decisions
2014-15	29,480	2,729	9.3 %
2013-14	32,963	3,213	9.7 %
2012-13	35,139	3,236	9.2 %
2011-12	35,491	3,636	10.2 %
2010-11	41,536	3,539	8.5 %

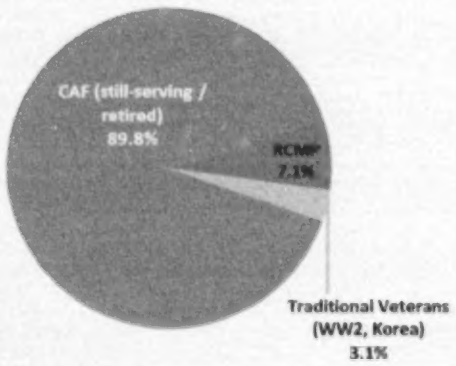
*VAC decisions with appeal rights to VRAB. This includes first applications, medical reassessments, and departmental reviews.

Although our caseload is primarily correlated with the annual volume of VAC decisions, it can fluctuate from year to year due to other factors. One of these is that there is no time limit to bring forward an appeal, i.e. Veterans can request an independent review of their VAC decision at any time.

New government initiatives for Veterans and their families can also impact the Board's work. For example, we have been identified to provide redress for the Critical Injury Benefit introduced in 2015. The Board's usual two-level process will apply to VAC decisions on this new benefit.

Regarding the individuals who made applications to the Board in 2014-15, there was a small change in the breakdown of service, with fewer applications from traditional Veterans and more applications from still-serving and retired CAF members.

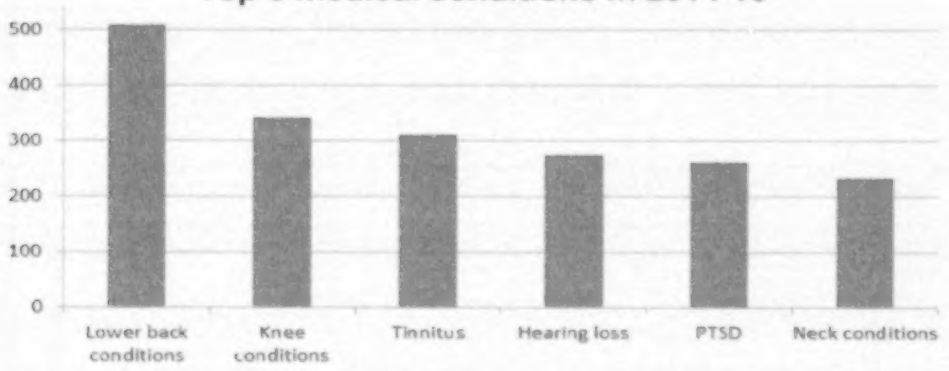
Applicant Make-Up 2014-15



WORKLOAD STATISTICS

The tables below provide information about the nature, volume, and outcome of cases at the Board, as well as information on the number and outcome of Federal Court judicial review decisions.

Top 6 medical conditions in 2014-15



Decision Volumes

Fiscal Year	Review	Appeal	Reconsideration	War Veterans Allowance	Total Decisions
2014-15	2,729	1,039	105	4	3,877
2013-14	3,213	1,159	142	11	4,525
2012-13	3,236	928	121	9	4,294
2011-12	3,636	1,072	178	22	4,908
2010-11	3,539	974	131	24	4,668

Favourability Rates

Fiscal Year	Review		Appeal	
	Decisions	% Favourable	Decisions	% Favourable
2014-15	2,729	49	1,039	43
2013-14	3,213	47	1,159	43
2012-13	3,236	51	928	34
2011-12	3,636	50	1,072	29
2010-11	3,539	50	974	33

* Note: The Board's systems track applications received. An application may include rulings on more than one medical condition or type of service. When a Veteran receives an increased level of entitlement or assessment for one aspect of their application, the decision is counted as favourable.

Federal Court Decisions

Fiscal Year	Number of FC decisions	Number that upheld VRAB decision	Number that overturned VRAB decision
2014-15	6	4	2
2013-14	11	8	3
2012-13	10	6	4
2011-12	14	7	7
2010-11	13	4	9

NATURE OF APPLICATIONS AND DECISIONS

In general, the Board receives two kinds of applications: those for entitlement to benefits based on the relationship between the disability and service, and those related to the level of assessment based on the extent or severity of the disability. In 2014-15 (as in recent years), entitlement cases made up about three-quarters of our work and assessment cases, one-quarter.

Thanks to recent systems improvements, we were able to look more closely at the reasons for awarding benefits at the Review level. We found that Members often rule favourably due to a combination of factors. For example, when we looked at all favourable Review decisions, we found that testimony and/or new medical or other documentary evidence were the basis for 81% of them. In the remaining cases, Members ruled favourably based on the available evidence, changes in policy/law, or errors in the previous decision.

This information expands our understanding of Veterans' circumstances and demonstrates the ongoing need for an independent appeal process. It also supports the overall goal of the disability benefits system of ensuring Veterans receive timely access to benefits for their service-related disabilities. In November 2013, we began sharing with VAC the data on the Board's reasons for awarding to support their efforts to identify trends and opportunities for improvements.

EVOLVING DEMAND FOR HEARINGS

The geographical distribution of Veterans applying for a Review hearing can vary annually. This fluctuating demand has an impact on scheduling and travel for hearings.

In 2014-15, the demand for hearings declined in some locations and increased in others. As it does every year, the Board worked closely with representative organizations to determine where and how often it should convene hearings based on the demand from Veterans and other applicants.

The Board decided to increase flexibility in its schedule by adding the option of 2-day hearing sessions in locations where the demand for hearings is low (while continuing to offer the usual 4-day hearing weeks in other, busier locations). This added flexibility gives Veterans in low-volume locations access to more timely hearings.

In 2014-15, we also heightened our priority to hear cases from Veterans of the Second World War and the Korean War in recognition of their service and age.

MORE COMPLEX CASES

As Veterans receive positive outcomes earlier in the process (i.e. at VAC first application or departmental review), we have noted that the cases appealed to the Board tend to be less straightforward than in the past. These cases often involve complex medical conditions and other issues that make it challenging for the Veteran to establish the required relationship between the disability and service.

This increased complexity has had an impact on the Board's operations and decisions.

Perhaps most significant is the time spent by Veterans and their representatives obtaining supporting evidence to prepare their case. The Board does not limit this valuable time; instead, we wait for the representative to tell us they are ready to proceed before scheduling the hearing.

For its part, the Board requires additional effort and time to provide quality documentation for Veterans' hearings. We ensure that the Statement of Case (the evidence package used by all the hearing parties) is well-organized, accurate, and complete. As a first step, we obtain relevant records—Veterans' medical and service records—either from VAC or, increasingly from National Defence (if not previously requested by VAC). These records, which come from other organizations, sometimes contain errors. For that reason, we review all incoming documentation to ensure it pertains to the individual in question, that scanned documents are legible, and that there are no duplications.

After the hearings, Board staff support Members by reviewing decisions to ensure that information is presented logically, that evidence and arguments have been addressed, and that reasons are clearly and plainly expressed.

Going forward, we are continuing to explore ways to better prepare and equip our Members to deal with an increasing number of cases involving complex matters.

Free Representation

Veterans who are dissatisfied with a VAC decision have access to free advice and representation from external organizations with expertise in Veterans' disability benefits.

The Bureau of Pensions Advocates (a free legal service provided by the Government of Canada), represents the vast majority of Veterans at Board hearings.

Service Officers from Veterans' organizations represent some Veterans, while a small number of Veterans choose to represent themselves or hire a private representative at their own expense.

PROCESSING TIMES AND SERVICE STANDARDS

If a Veteran is dissatisfied with a decision on disability benefits, they will contact a representative organization who counsels them on redress options and on obtaining additional information to support their case. When they are ready to proceed with a Review or Appeal, the representative registers the case with the Board. From the time an application is registered with the Board until the hearing is held, some of the preparation time is shared with the representative and Veteran, and therefore not within the Board's control. We take into account these pockets of shared time to establish realistic and attainable service standards for the part of the process time that we can control. We have demonstrated our commitment to timeliness by meeting these service standards for the vast majority of cases.

One of the Board's service standards is to issue its written decision within six weeks of the hearing. This table shows the percentage of cases for which we met this goal during the last five years.

Fiscal Year	Review	Appeal
2014-15	79%	84%
2013-14	84%	85%
2012-13	87%	89%
2011-12	82%	86%
2010-11	85%	88%

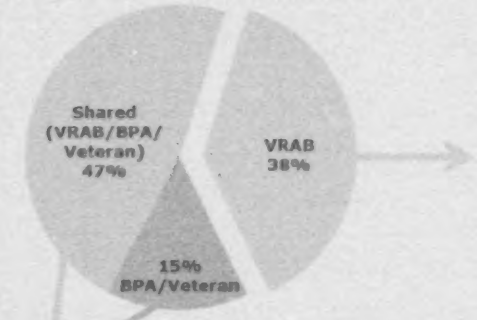
In 2013, the Board established a new service commitment: to issue its decision within 16 weeks of the hearing being scheduled. This table shows our performance since then.

Fiscal Year	Review	Appeal
2014-15	95%	96%
2013-14	97%	98%
2012-13	-	-
2011-12	-	-
2010-11	-	-

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE?

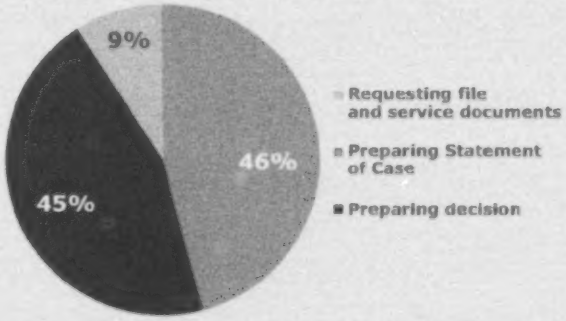
In 2014-15, from the time an application was registered with the Board to when a decision was issued, it took an average of 28 weeks at Review and 18 weeks at Appeal. As noted above, some of this time is shared with the representative and Veteran. Let's take a closer look at how the time breaks down.*

How does the time break down?



- BPA and Veteran prepare for the hearing, which could include seeking additional evidence
- A hearing is scheduled for a time that works for all parties.

What does the Board do with its time?



*These charts show the time breakdown at the Review level

4. Year in Review

In 2014-15, the Board continued to focus on service excellence for Veterans through continuous program improvements.

POSITIVE FEEDBACK FROM VETERANS OMBUDSMAN

In February 2015, the Ombudsman published a positive follow-up report on the Board's response to his 2012 recommendations regarding judicial reviews. The Ombudsman found that the Board had made significant progress in implementing the recommendations related to its work.

In particular, the Board:

- resumed reporting to Parliament on outcomes at Federal Court as an indicator of fairness;
- implemented a new decision writing checklist to support clear, concise, and well-organized reasons;
- worked with the Royal Canadian Legion to validate its implementation of plain language writing for Board decisions and legal concepts, including benefit of the doubt;
- introduced new criteria for fair hearings and quality decisions for performance reporting;
- continued to review guidance given by the Federal Court with Board Members at monthly teleconferences and in training;
- raised awareness of the importance of Federal Court decisions on portfolio operations, with a commitment to meet regularly with VAC and the Bureau of Pensions Advocates to review and discuss trends;
- published Noteworthy Decisions on its website and on CanLII, a well-known online legal resource, as well as other resources to increase transparency in decision making;
- began publishing Board decisions made pursuant to a Federal Court order to rehear; and
- reviewed and implemented a new process for priority treatment and scheduling of cases returned by the Federal Court for a new hearing.

We were very pleased that the Ombudsman recognized our efforts and improvements, which are indicative of our commitment to serving Veterans and their families. We take the Ombudsman's input very seriously and will continue to work with his office to improve the appeal process.

OPERATIONS

Better Hearing Documentation

Our business process redesign team continued its work in 2014-15 on the Statement of Case (SOC), which is the documentation assembled by the Board and used by all of the hearing parties.

The SOC is an important decision-making tool. It contains evidence relevant to the Veteran's case, including copies of documents from Service Health Records and VAC files, previous decisions and other materials. As such, it can be a complex package of information with a large number of pages.

At the recommendation of the redesign team, the Board implemented several changes to the format and content of the SOC that improve its quality by making it more user-friendly for Board Members, Veterans, and representatives.

Managing Information and Protecting Privacy

In 2014-15, the Board continued to modernize its information management practices and to promote a privacy culture through operational improvements, training, and communications. In May 2014, we marked our first annual Privacy Month to put a spotlight on the appropriate use and protection of Veterans' personal information.

We also worked to implement directives from the Treasury Board Secretariat on recordkeeping and privacy practices, both of which set out sound frameworks for safeguarding the information in our care. Finally, of particular note, the Board instituted a "Misfiled Document Check" on incoming documentation from other organizations to ensure that files did not contain any documents related to another individual. This additional step has helped the Board reduce the chance of releasing documents misfiled by other organizations.

The Board was pleased to learn that our efforts are making a difference: we received very positive results in the privacy audit conducted by the Office of the Comptroller General in 2013-14.

Kathleen Vent, the Board's Director of Legal Services, looks at equipment from the RCMP forensic identification unit at an information session about the physical and mental health effects of various jobs in the RCMP.

DECISION-MAKING

The Board is required to provide written reasons for its decisions so that Veterans know how and why the decision has been made. The following decisions, issued in 2014-15, illustrate important aspects of the appeal process and common issues in cases heard by the Board.

The Value of Testimony

In a decision, the Board relied on the Veteran's credible testimony of an accident during service, which he only reported several years later, to award him entitlement to benefits. The Review hearing is the only time the Veteran can appear before decision makers and testify about the facts of their case. Oral testimony is important new evidence that can have a significant impact on the outcome of a case.

Credible Medical Opinions

In a decision, the Board was unable to rely on a doctor's opinion to find the link between the Veteran's major depression and degenerative disc disease because it did not address relevant aspects of her medical history. The Federal Court has given the Board direction, through its decisions, about the key components of a credible medical opinion. In broad terms, the opinion must be provided by a qualified person; be based on a reasonably complete and accurate medical history; and have a logical conclusion based on the relevant medical-scientific information from recognized texts or studies.

Reporting Injuries

In a decision, the Board awarded benefits to a Veteran more than 40 years after his release from the military for a disability caused by an injury he suffered in a parachuting accident during service. Though the Veteran had not immediately reported his tailbone injury, he did so when he discharged from the military and also prior to the surgery he required shortly thereafter. To award benefits under the legislation, the Board needs credible evidence of the relationship between the disability and service. This is why it is so important for members to report injuries during service and to seek necessary medical care that may illustrate a continuity of complaints over time.

Benefit of the Doubt

In a decision, the Board awarded benefits to a Veteran by resolving doubt about his diagnosis of rib fractures and accepting new evidence from a doctor relating the disability to a service-related training accident the previous year. When the Board weighs the evidence in a case, it is required to look at it in the best light possible and resolve doubt so that it benefits the Veteran pursuant to section 39 of the *VRAB Act*.

Connection to Service

In a decision, the Board awarded new partial entitlement to a Veteran after recognizing that service-related trauma contributed to his Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The most common issue before the Board is whether a Veteran's condition was caused or permanently aggravated by military or RCMP service. The Board is often presented with evidence of contributing factors before, during and after a member's service, and must weigh it as a whole to determine the degree of causal connection between the disability and service.

Did you know?

The Board publishes a range of decisions on CanLII.

You can find the decisions mentioned here on CanLII.

BOARD MEMBERS

Appointments
The Board was pleased to welcome seven new Members in 2014-15, all of whom have military, medical, policing or legal experience. These are the backgrounds that are preferred under our Member Selection Process in recognition of the nature of our work and the people we serve. One of these Members, CAF Veteran and lawyer Thomas Jarmyn, was also appointed Deputy Chair with the added responsibility of supporting the Chair in leading the Board in fulfilling its mandate for Veterans.

In 2014-15, more than half of the Board's Members were CAF and RCMP Veterans or health care professionals.

Member Selection Process
In 2014-15, the Board continued to make it easier for interested Canadians to apply under its Member Selection Process. Along with the new online exam, we removed our application deadlines and began accepting applications on an ongoing basis. This helps us meet the demand for hearings by having year-round access to pre-qualified candidates to fill vacant Member positions.

Member Training and Professional Development
New Board Members undergo a rigorous training program before hearing cases. Once they have completed this initial training, all Members partake in annual professional development from legal, medical, military, and RCMP experts to make sure they have the most recent information necessary to making fair, well-reasoned decisions for Veterans.

Training for Board Members 2014-15

From the CAF:

- Mental Health and Psychiatric Conditions within the CAF: Current Status, Treatment and Research (Col. Rakesh Jetly, OMM, CD, MD, FRCPC)

From the RCMP:

- Mental Health
- Psychological Debriefings
- Harassment

From dental/medical experts:

- Temporomandibular Joint Disorders and Treatments
- Bruxism
- Dental Charting
- Dental Fractures
- Table of Disabilities – Partially Contributing Tables
- Closed Brain Injuries

From legal experts:

- Decision Writing and the Deliberative Process (Chief Justice (Ret'd) Warren Winkler)

From Board staff:

- Structure of Decisions
- Reconsiderations
- Evaluating the Credibility of Evidence
- Expert Evidence
- Exposure to Foreign Substances
- Psychiatric Conditions
- Wiki and Kindle as Reference Tools

COMMUNICATIONS AND OUTREACH

The Board continued to make timely, accurate, and clear communications about its program a priority in 2014-15. Our goals were to raise awareness of appeal rights among serving personnel as well as to help applicants better understand the appeal process itself.

Outreach with Serving Personnel

To expand our outreach with the CAF, we developed an information video for the Second Career Assistant Network (SCAN) seminars attended by members who are leaving the military for medical reasons. This five-minute video provides the basics about the Board's role in disability benefits adjudication and how individuals can exercise their appeal rights if they are dissatisfied with a disability decision made by VAC. The video was integrated into the SCAN seminars across the country in November 2014.

The Board continued to work closely with the CAF and RCMP Liaisons, as they represent the interests of their respective organizations within the Veterans Affairs portfolio. Through them, we gain their insight on the life and work of military and RCMP personnel, and get their feedback, as serving personnel, on the appeal process to guide program improvements and communications activities at the Board.

Outreach with Veterans

The Board also worked with Veterans' organizations to broaden its outreach in 2014-15. We continued to build on our longstanding working relationship with the Royal Canadian Legion through meetings with its executive, training for its service officers, and participation in the 45th Dominion Convention. We also provided brochures and information in support of annual general meetings held by the RCMP Veterans Association and the Army, Navy and Air Force Veterans in Canada (ANAVETS). We were also pleased to provide training to ANAVETS representatives who assist Veterans in their communities and to have them observe the Board's Review hearings.

Web Work

We continued to add new, helpful information to our website. On the judicial review page, web users can find links to Federal Court decisions as well as Board decisions for cases reheard after being returned by the Federal Court.

These decisions illustrate:

- the Court's role and the reasons it may or may not find a Board decision to be within a range of possible, acceptable outcomes with respect to the facts and the law; and
- how the Board follows the Court's directions and guidance, and how the new ruling can be different or the same as the ruling in the Board's original decision.

The evidence page, found in a new web section called "Information for Applicants and Representatives," explains what the Board requires for medical and expert opinions to help Veterans bring forward the best evidence to support their case. The Board also continued work behind the scenes to prepare its web content for eventual transition to Canada.ca, the Government of Canada's new, central website.

Members of the Board's senior management meet with members of the Legion executive.

FEEDBACK

Last year was our second year administering the Review Hearing Exit Survey. We launched this exit survey in April 2013 to get feedback from Veterans about their Review hearing. We wanted to find out if there were ways we could improve the experience, and ensure that we were fulfilling our commitment to provide Veterans with respectful hearings.

In 2014-15, approximately half of all Veterans who had a Review hearing completed the survey, with the vast majority of them giving us excellent feedback. In fact, the results were even more positive than the previous year, with higher percentages of respondents strongly agreeing (vs. agreeing) with the affirmative statements in the questions. Of particular note:

- 95% of respondents agreed that Board Members treated them with respect;
- 93% agreed that Board Members listened to what they had to say; and
- 91% agreed that Board Members made efforts to put them at ease.

In response to the final, open-ended question, we heard many of the same things as we did the previous year. This feedback confirmed to us what we are doing well and the areas we need to work on. Our main areas of focus continue to be training and providing our Members with performance feedback, as well as communicating more about how a hearing works.

Review Hearing Exit Survey 2014-15

1. Board members clearly explained how the hearing would proceed.

Strongly Agree	60.7%	763
Agree	36.9%	464
Neutral	1.7%	21
Disagree	0.6%	8
Strongly Disagree	0.2%	2
	Total Responses	**1258**

2. Board members gave my representative and me the opportunity to fully explain my case.

Strongly Agree	57.0%	717
Agree	36.3%	456
Neutral	3.9%	49
Disagree	2.1%	27
Strongly Disagree	0.6%	8
	Total Responses	**1257**

3. Board members listened to what I had to say.

Strongly Agree	55.6%	700
Agree	37.6%	474
Neutral	4.3%	54
Disagree	1.6%	20
Strongly Disagree	1.0%	12
	Total Responses	**1260**

4. Board members made efforts to put me at ease.

Strongly Agree	51.5%	645
Agree	39.3%	492
Neutral	7.3%	91
Disagree	1.1%	14
Strongly Disagree	0.9%	11
	Total Responses	**1253**

5. Board members treated me with respect.

Strongly Agree	65.4%	820
Agree	29.7%	372
Neutral	3.3%	41
Disagree	1.1%	14
Strongly Disagree	0.5%	6
	Total Responses	**1253**

6. The hearing was conducted in a fair manner.

Strongly Agree	48.8%	611
Agree	39.1%	490
Neutral	8.5%	107
Disagree	2.7%	34
Strongly Disagree	0.9%	11
	Total Responses	**1253**

WORKPLACE WELLNESS

PSES

The Public Service Employee Survey (PSES) is a survey of federal public servants that has been conducted every three years since 1999. In 2014, the Board had an exceptional response rate of 83%, which is 12% higher than the public service average. Our results also indicate levels of overall satisfaction well above the public service averages, with:

- 84% of employees indicating they would recommend the Board as a great place to work; and
- 92% of employees indicating they get a sense of satisfaction from their work.

As a follow-up to the survey, the Board is consulting with employees to identify areas for improvement.

Service Dogs in the Office

The Board, which strives to be a workplace that supports and encourages new initiatives, welcomed a canine, Simon, into the office in 2014 when one of its employees became a puppy-raiser for a service dog organization. This represented a good opportunity to educate employees about service dogs, while also spreading good cheer in the office. It is fitting that Simon started his socialization at the Board, as he has been designated to be paired with a Veteran when he is fully trained.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

"We're not writing for ourselves: we're writing for the reader." That was the message delivered to our Board Members at their annual training seminar in March 2015 by the Honourable Warren K. Winkler, former Chief Justice of Ontario.

Drawing on his substantial experience as a judge and counsel, Mr. Winkler spoke to Board Members and staff about the importance of plain language in decision writing and clarity in the deliberative process. He encouraged Members to state the conclusion up front, and to write logically and plainly to explain their reasons. This training activity supported the Board's efforts to ensure decisions are clear and easy to understand.

We also continued to publish plain language materials about the appeal process on our website, including information about the Board's evidence requirements and judicial reviews.

At their last all-staff meeting of the year, Board employees were given a presentation about service dogs by Simon's handler and another local handler. Here, Simon and fellow service dog in training Lila are on their best behaviour.

5. Looking Ahead

In September 2015, the Board will mark 20 years as the independent tribunal charged with the important responsibility of hearing Reviews and Appeals of disability benefits decisions from Veterans, CAF and RCMP members, and their families.

In 2015-16, we will continue to focus on:

- providing timely, respectful hearings and fair, plain-language decisions;
- improving our operations;
- communicating more; and
- managing with accountability and transparency.

In particular, here are some initiatives we plan to pursue.

Paperless Process

In the last several years, the Board has steadily integrated technology into its operations to make them more efficient. For example, we receive electronic applications for Reviews and Appeals from representatives on behalf of Veterans, use a web-based application to share documentation with the hearing parties in real time, and have replaced hard-copy resources in our hearing rooms with electronic versions available on e-readers. Ultimately, our goal is to continue to use technology and other means to reduce time and money spent mailing documents from our hearing locations to our administration office in Charlottetown. In 2015-16, we will work to design and prepare for the implementation of a paperless hearing process from beginning to end.

Enhanced Pre-hearing Support for Members

As with any tribunal, Board staff support the work of Members by providing advice and feedback to foster quality and consistency in decision making. In 2015-16, the Board will enhance its pre-hearing support to help Members better prepare for hearings which should reduce decision time frames. This support will include the preparation of indexes for large Statements of Case to assist Members in their case study.

Program Evaluation

The Board will conduct a program evaluation in 2015-16 to identify opportunities for improvement and to gain insight on our relevance, performance and other areas of focus. We will make our results available to Canadians.

Improving Communications

The Board will continue to find ways in 2015-16 to communicate better and more often with Veterans, stakeholders and Canadians.

To this end, we will carry out a comprehensive review of our forms and letters for applicants to make sure they are helpful and written in plain, respectful language. This work will extend and complement the Board's ongoing focus on plain language decision-writing.

We also plan to publish more decisions online to increase transparency and improve understanding of the Board's decision making. These will be decisions for a variety of medical conditions and legal questions as well as decisions that provide interpretive guidance and persuasive commentary on issues of law, policy, or procedure.

We are also proceeding to establish a Twitter account for the Board in 2015-16 to share our progress on these and other initiatives with interested audiences.

CONTACT US

If you have any questions about the Board's work or would like more information about our program, please contact us:

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Martin Spriggs—who cycled across Canada in 2014 promoting suicide prevention and raising public awareness of mental health issues among Canada's military personnel, Veterans and their families—visited the Board when he stopped in Charlottetown. He inspired staff with an impassioned presentation on mental health and military service.